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ABSTRACT

A 1978 theory of politeness based on the concept of "face" (public self-image) and proposed at the time as comprehensive and universal, is examined in the context of more recent research. The theory holds that everyone has both negative and positive face, both of which are threatened by another at times, and that individuals will choose from among five politeness strategies to use before performing a face-threatening act. People from different cultures will implement politeness strategies according to the ethos of their particular cultures, and one or more strategy(ies) will be prevalent. Criticisms of the theory made by researchers are discussed, including perceived flaws in the proposed bases for individuals' selection of strategies (rights and obligations) and refutation of the notion that each individual has both positive and negative face. It is argued that new definitions (in particular, for the notions of discernment and volition) and concepts (relative face orientation) must now be incorporated into politeness theory. Contains seven references. (MSE)

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The universality of face in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory: A Japanese perspective

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In 1978, Brown and Levinson published their politeness theory, claiming it to be universal. Since that time, much research has been conducted to determine the limitations of this theory. This paper examines research which has been done on politeness strategies in Japanese to see how relevant the theory is now.

When people are involved in conversations, they individually consider certain variables, whether consciously or sub-consciously, that help them determine the form that their speech will take. In 1955, Goffman called these variables "face," and defined it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1955: 213). In 1978, Brown and Levinson, using Goffman's definition of "face" as a starting point, proposed a comprehensive and, according to Brown and Levinson, universal theory of politeness. Since that time, researchers have been working to refine the definition of face and adapt this politeness theory, in order to decide whether or not the definition - and therefore, the theory - is universal. This paper discusses research that has been conducted since the theory was first published, looking especially at research that has compared face in Japanese politeness strategies and English politeness strategies, in an attempt to determine the present status of the theory.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1978: 66). They then divide face into two separate, but related aspects - positive face and negative face - which they define in terms of wants that every person knows every other person has, and knows are in his best interest to, at least partially, satisfy (1978: 67). Tracy explains, "positive face concerns the desire to be appreciated and approved of by selected others. Negative face concerns a person's want to be unimpeded and free from imposition" (Tracy 1990: 210).

When an act of verbal or non-verbal communication "run[s] contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 70), this is called a "face-threatening act" (FTA). An example of a speech act that threatens the hearer's (H's) negative face would be a request, because this means that the speaker (S) is impeding on H by asking H not to do what H wants, but rather to do what S wants (Fasold 1990: 161). On the other hand, a speech act that threatens H's positive face would be "a contradiction or expression of disagreement, which means the speaker thinks there is something wrong with an opinion held by the hearer" (Fasold 1990: 161). As mentioned above, S's negative or positive face may also be threatened. This could happen in the case of an offer, which would threaten S's negative face because if she carries out the offer, she would be meeting H's wants and not necessarily her own wants (Fasold 1990: 161). S's positive face would be threatened in the case of confessions, admissions of guilt, and apologies, where the speaker is admitting that she has done something that is not expected (or not done something that is expected) of her (Fasold 1990: 161).

Brown and Levinson base their theory on the acceptance of the two assumptions stated above, that is, everyone has both negative

face and positive face, and both of these aspects of face are, at times, threatened by another (Brown & Levinson 1978: 63, and Fasold 1990: 161). Another assumption Brown and Levinson make is that the speaker is "endowed with ... a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 63). These assumptions are crucial to their theory because they believe that a person will consider the best politeness strategy possible before performing an FTA.

The strategies which they discuss can be grouped into five superstrategies which are given in the chart below (the higher the number of the strategy, the more polite it is).

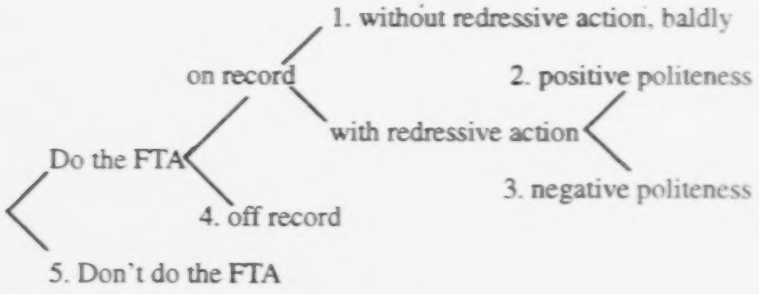

Figure 1: Five Politeness Strategies (Brown & Levinson 1978: 74)

The first distinction that should be made here is between doing an FTA on record (strategies 1, 2, and 3) and doing it off record (strategy 4). The term "on record" is used when an expression has "one unambiguously attributable intention with which witnesses would concur"; on the other hand, the term "off record" is used when an expression can have "more than one unambiguously attributable intention" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 73-74). For example, if person A wanted to borrow person B's car and said, "May I borrow your car, tomorrow?" she would be going on record because the request to

borrow B's car is unambiguous; however, if she said, "I need to pick up my friend at the airport tomorrow, but I don't have a car," she would be going off record because there is no explicit request.

Doing an act baldly, without redressive action (strategy 1) "involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 74). To do the FTA baldly in the above example, person A might say, "Lend me your car, tomorrow!" Doing an act with redressive action (strategies 2 and 3) means "'giv[ing] face' to the addressee" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 74). This can mean doing the act using 'positive politeness' (strategy 2), "oriented toward the positive face of H, the positive image that he claims for himself," or using 'negative politeness'[1] (strategy 3), "oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 75). To do the FTA given above using positive politeness, person A might say, "Hey, that's a great suit you have on! Is it new? (. . .) By the way, may I borrow your car, tomorrow?" (adapted from Brown & Levinson 1978: 108). By asking about person B's suit, person A would be showing that she is interested in something that person B presumably finds desirable , for example, the suit. On the other hand, to do it using negative politeness, person A might say, "You couldn't by any chance loan me your car, tomorrow, could you?" (adapted from Brown & Levinson 1978: 141). In this case, person A is trying to partially satisfy person B's desire to not be imposed upon by implying that she does not think he can loan her the car.

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[1]Tracy (1990) states that only negative politeness is "similar to what people in everyday life mean by 'being polite,'" while positive politeness is a "communicative way of building solidarity, showing the other is liked and seen as desirable" (pp. 211-212).

It is not justifiable, however, to always choose the most polite strategy, because "that will imply that the act is more face threatening than it actually is" (Fasold 1990: 162); therefore, S must decide which strategy to use. This decision is based on three factors (Brown & Levinson 1978: 79):

> 1) the 'social distance' (D) of S [the speaker] and H [the hearer] (a symmetric relation) [For example, with a friend there is not a great social distance; however, there is with a stranger.]
>
> 2) the relative 'power' (P) of S and H (an asymmetric relation) [For example, a friend does not hold the same position of power as does the President.]
>
> 3) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture [For example, asking someone to borrow a quarter would not be as great an imposition as asking that person to borrow one hundred dollars.]

Whenever S intends to do an FTA, she must first take into account these three factors in order to decide which strategy to employ. It is the third factor that Brown and Levinson use to allow for different cultures to fall into their universal theory.

In discussing how people from different cultures would implement their politeness strategy, they introduce the term "ethos", defined as "the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society." (Brown & Levinson 1978: 248). Since different cultures embody differences in ethos, certain cultures will have a tendency towards one or another of the five main politeness strategies. For example, they claim that the U.S. is a positive-politeness culture because the level of weightiness of any given FTA remains relatively low, while Japan is a negative-politeness culture because the people tend to be more "standoffish" (1978: 250)[2]. Characterizing a culture as a positive-politeness or negative-politeness culture does not mean that that strategy is the only strategy used, but only

[2]On page 249, Brown and Levinson do allow that their hypothesis "may of course be wrong."

that it is more prevalent within that culture. Thus, while claiming that their theory is universal, Brown and Levinson have allowed for the differences in strategy selection that may arise across cultures.

Research since the publication of the Politeness Theory

One criticism that Tracy (1990) has made of the politeness theory is that it needs to take into account "the way selection of facework strategies in situated social roles (e.g. teacher - student) seems to be based on rights and obligations, rather than on an abstract computation of distance, intimacy, and rank" (p. 216). In 1986, Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki, and Ogino looked at this point as it related to individuals in different cultures. They replaced the terms 'distance', 'power', and 'rank', with the term 'discernment' (translated from the Japanese term *wakimae*), which refers to the accepted social rules (both verbal and non-verbal) within a given situation. They also introduced the idea of 'volition', which allows a speaker to choose the correct way to act in any given situation (1986: 348). These two new terms allowed the researchers to look at how much speech is obligatory in a situation in a given culture (discernment), and how much variation in speech is allowable in a situation in a given culture (volition). Hill, et al., found that Brown and Levinson's theory was not deficient with regard to the selection of face work strategies based on rights and obligations and seemed to hold true across cultures.

In their research, Hill, et al. (1986) first asked a small group of university students from both Japan and America to answer three questions:

1) List the people you commonly meet.

2) List all the expressions you use in borrowing a pen.

3) List all the expressions you use in asking the time (p. 354).

From the data they received they created a survey which they gave to a much larger group of university students in each country. This survey asked the students to rank the expressions used for borrowing a pen (20 in Japanese; 22 in English) on a scale from 1-5, where 1 meant being most uninhibited and 5 meant being most careful.[3] The students were also asked to rank the people addressed along a similar scale ranging from the person with whom you are most uninhibited to the person with whom you are most careful. Finally, the students were asked to choose the expression(s) they would use with each person addressed. At this point, it is important to mention that the data gathered is not from actual recorded conversations, but only native speakers' impressions of how they would use their languages in given situations. Hill et al. state that the data were collected in this manner in order to gather "a large sample in two countries" (1986: 353). While this point should not in any way discredit the research done, it should be taken into consideration that this method allowed students to respond with more than one request when in the real situation only one request would be given. This consideration comes into play mainly where they state that the average number of responses for each addressee differed between languages (2.55 for Americans; 1.01 for Japanese) (1986: 360).

In the figures given, Hill et al. (1986) show that, while there are similarities between American and Japanese uses of politeness strategies in different situations, for example, in neither language were expressions considered to be most uninhibited used with persons with whom one would be most careful, or vice-versa, there is a great disparity in the agreement made on the proper request for each addressee.

[3]The term 'uninhibited' was explained within the survey to mean "when being most uninhibited (relaxed) in speech", while the term 'careful' was explained as "being most careful in speech" (1986: 352).

In Japanese, the agreement on the proper request for each addressee is very high, while in American English the agreement is low. Hill et al. attribute this difference to the difference between the roles of discernment and volition within the politeness strategy selection process of each language.

While both discernment and volition need to be used in any given situation, the weight given to each will vary among cultures; therefore, in Japanese, discernment is the primary consideration when choosing a politeness strategy, and volition is secondary. On the other hand, in American English, volition is the primary consideration, and discernment is secondary (1986: 362). It is this distinction that creates the disparity in agreement, and "lend[s] empirical support to the hypothesis of Brown and Levinson that D(istance) and P(ower) are two major elements operating" in the selection of an appropriate politeness strategy when performing an FTA (1986: 363).

More fundamental than Tracy's criticism of Brown and Levinson's theory is that raised by both Matsumoto (1988) and Mao (1994). They claim that Brown and Levinson's initial assumption that all members of society have both negative and positive face is not necessarily universal (Matsumoto 1988: 405 and Mao 1994). This criticism, although culturally based, can be seen as being related to Tracy's (1990) criticism mentioned above. Within Japanese society, people who hold certain positions are expected to meet certain obligations in relation to people who hold lower positions, and, therefore, when asked to meet these obligations by a person in a lower position, the person in a higher position would not deem this as an imposition (Matsumoto 1988: 410).

In stating her position, Matsumoto gives examples of "Formulaic expressions as 'relation-acknowledging devices'" (1988: 409). She explains that these formulaic expressions are the basis for Japanese

politeness strategy (1988: 413) - a position echoed in the findings by Hill et al. that Japanese speakers opt for "specific linguistic forms, at a conventional level of politeness" after assessing "the factors of addressee status and general situation relative to speaker's own" (1986: 362). What she asserts is that Japanese people do not try to avoid imposing on others, but make statements that might be perceived, by a non-Japanese, as an imposition, in order to acknowledge the addressee's higher rank (1988: 410). The reason for this convention is that, in Japanese society, it is understood that a person of lower rank is dependent on a person of higher rank; thus, by expressing one's dependence on another, one raises, or reaffirms, the other's relative position (1988: 410). One example of this that she gives is the expression "Syuzin o doozo yorosiku onegaisimasu. [(lit.) 'I ask you to please treat/take care of my husband well.']" which would be said by a woman when speaking to her husband's boss (1988: 410). Matsumoto admits that such expressions might be considered examples of positive politeness because they "enhance the addressee's face", but claims that this is not the case because "it is not done straight-forwardly," and there is no "manifestation of intimacy" (Matsumoto 1986: 410). Therefore, in Japanese culture, negative face, as defined by Brown and Levinson (not wanting others to disturb you), is hard to validate.

Mao (1994) uses both Matsumoto's claims and Brown and Levinson's claims to present a new definition of face, "the relative face orientation" (1994: 471). The relative face orientation may be defined as:

> an underlying direction of face that emulates, though never completely attaining, one of two interactional ideals that may be salient in a given speech community: the ideal social identity, or the ideal indi-

> vidual autonomy. The specific content of face in a given speech community is determined by one of these two interactional ideals sanctioned by the members of the community." (1994: 472)

What Mao is saying is that there are two views of face, individual (Brown & Levinson 1978) and social (Matsumoto 1988, and Mao 1994), and in any given society each view exists; however, one view may be more prevalent than the other. Only when this distinction is made can we understand the strategies that people from different cultures use in being polite. This new definition of face not only addresses the criticisms of Matsumoto (1988) and Mao (1994), but, since it introduces the idea of a social face, also addresses Tracy's (1990) criticism concerning rights and obligations, which can be seen as an individual's expectations of society and its members.

A considerable amount of work has been done in the area of politeness and face; however, still more needs to be done before any definite conclusions can be drawn. In light of the criticisms of Brown and Levinson's theory discussed above, it is now necessary to look at how a theory can incorporate these new definitions and understandings.

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